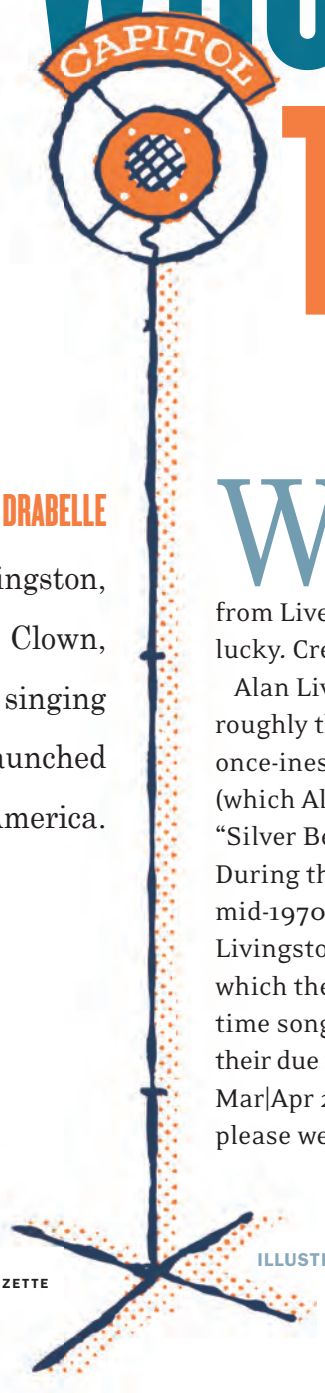
THE MAN WHO KNEW TALENT



BY DENNIS DRABELLE

That would be Alan Livingston, who invented Bozo the Clown, saved Frank Sinatra's singing career, and (maybe) launched the Beatles in America.

Writing the novelty song "I Tawt I Taw a Puddy Tat" was campy. Salvaging the career of the vocally ailing Frank Sinatra was noble. Signing a hirsute rock group from Liverpool to a recording contract was either prescient or lucky. Creating Bozo the Clown was sublime.

Alan Livingston W'40 accomplished all that and more at roughly the same time that his brother Jay C'37 was writing the once-inescapable theme for the long-running TV show *Bonanza* (which Alan produced) and co-writing the Christmas standard "Silver Bells" plus three Oscar-winning songs for movies. During the 30-year period from the end of World War II to the mid-1970s, just about everything touched by the Brothers Livingston turned to gold, platinum, or brittanium (the alloy of which the Oscar statuette is made). Jay Livingston and his long-time songwriting partner, Ray Evans W36, have already received their due in these pages ["Good, Bad or Otherwise, Keep Peddling," Mar|Apr 2012, most recently]. Now, ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the multi-talented kid brother.

ILLUSTRATION BY KEVIN MERCER

The Livingston boys (the name was originally Levison) grew up in McDonald, Pennsylvania, 18 miles southwest of Pittsburgh, where their immigrant parents owned a shoe store. Both sons were musical from an early age; when not practicing on their instruments, they could often be found in Pittsburgh, taking in live shows. At Penn, the brothers formed a dance band called the Continentals. If you took a summer cruise to Scandinavia or South America in the 1930s, you might have boogie-woogied to the Continentals' after-supper jive. When Evans joined the band, the future Oscar-winning composing duo began to gel.

After college, Alan Livingston moved to New York, where he worked in advertising. Midway through World War II, he enlisted in the Army as a private and rose to the rank of second lieutenant. Rather than return to New York after the war ended, he chased a notion that had come to him while he was reading an article in *Life* magazine: people in California, it reported, "were making $10,000 a year and [had] swimming pools in their back yards." He hitched a ride on a military plane to Los Angeles, where he landed a job with Capitol Records, a young company headed by the great lyricist Johnny Mercer. Livingston's first major assignment—to develop a line of children's records—may sound less than plum, but it had the advantage of turning him loose on virgin soil, in which almost anything could be planted. With help from an artist, Livingston created Bozo the Clown and devised a novel format in which to purvey him: an album consisting of 78 rpm records, each in its own protective sleeve, and an accompanying storybook.

Bozo at the Circus, the first album in what grew into a series, appeared in 1946, but it was a 1948 sequel, *Bozo Under the Sea*, that captivated your then-five-year-old correspondent. As Bozo (voiced by Pinto Colvig) recounted his adventures on record, you followed along with the pictures in the text. To let unlettered readers know when it was time to turn the page, recorded bubbles would escape from Bozo's oxygen tank with a *glubbity-glub-glub*. With its ability to engage multiple senses (ear, eye, and touch), the album proved irresistibly engaging, especially once you'd learned to operate a phonograph without adult supervision.

Bozo and the record-reader format became big hits, and the clown crossed over into television via franchising: soon many a US city—and eventually also cities in Mexico, Brazil, Thailand, and elsewhere—had its own locally produced Bozo show. (The future *Today Show* weatherman Willard Scott was one of these cloned clowns.) Bozo wasn't just a doltish jester anymore, he was a gold mine. It would be fun to credit Livingston with adding the word *bozo* to the lexicon as a synonym for *fool*, but that usage seems to have predated the clown's genesis.

Starting in 1949, Hopalong ruled—Hopalong Cassidy, that is, a Wild West hero portrayed in dozens of B movies by actor William Boyd. Boyd had bought up the rights to his old films with the idea of peddling them to the new mass medium of television. The move paid off handsomely, and not just for Hoppy. In 1950, Livingston released *Hopalong Cassidy and the Singing Bandit*, with narration by Boyd and a whinny by Hoppy's horse, Topper, as the cue to turn the page. The album became the first kids' record to make the top-10 charts.

At Livingston's urging, Capitol teamed up with Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies, a brand name for cartoons put out by Warner Bros. studio. In 1947, the brains behind Looney Tunes paired two characters who had already appeared separately in other cartoons: Tweety Bird, a tiny yellow canary, and Sylvester, a strapping black-and-white cat whose strongest imprecation was "Sufferin' Succotash." Four years later, Livingston wrote the catchy "I Tawt I Taw a Puddy Cat (A-Creepin' up on Me)" to cement this animated partnership. The protean-voiced Mel Blanc played both the lisping bird and the ravenous cat, and with the help of tape recorders the frenemies sang the ditty's last verse in unison.

With his division accounting for 20 percent of Capitol's revenue, Livingston had reached his apogee in kiddy showbiz. James Kaplan gives him this rousing introduction in his book *Frank: The Voice*, "Almost overnight, Alan Livingston achieved boy-wonder status. Seven years [after joining Capitol], still just in his mid-thirties, he was hungry for a grown-up coup." In 1953, one presented itself in the form of Frank Sinatra.

The ex-bobbysoxers' idol was in a bad way. True, he'd just wrapped up work on his first non-singing film role, in *From Here to Eternity* (for which he was to win an Oscar as best supporting actor). But tension from his stormy marriage to movie star Ava Gardner was affecting Sinatra's singing. He'd once been known as The Voice, but nowadays his lower-case voice was liable to crack, and he might reach for a high note only to find it AWOL. Young Eddie Fisher had replaced him as America's male heartthrob of popular song; Sinatra had been dropped by his record label; and, according to Kaplan, his agent "rang every record company's phone off the hook until he finally reached Alan Livingston," who was now director of creative operations for Capitol. Asked if he would be interested in signing Sinatra, Livingston immediately said yes. The agent was so beaten down by rejections that he forgot himself and replied, "You would?"

The signing did not sit well with Livingston's colleagues. When he announced it at Capitol's annual sales convention, Kaplan reports, "Everyone in the room groaned."

"I only know talent," Livingston replied, "and Frank is the best singer in the world. There's nobody who can touch him."

The Voice's voice recovered, but Livingston still faced a challenge. He wanted to give the crooner a fresh sound, which meant weaning him from his longtime—and, in Livingston's opinion, soporific—arranger, Axel Stordahl. Fortunately, Stordahl took himself out of the running. When Sinatra called Stordahl to discuss the song list for their first Capitol recording session in Los Angeles, the arranger said he couldn't make it, that he would be in New York then. Sinatra asked why. Stordahl confessed that he'd committed to a new TV show starring, um, Eddie Fisher. Sinatra hung up on him.

Now all Livingston had to do was get Sinatra to work with a promising young arranger whose buoyant collaborations with Nat "King" Cole had done well for Capitol. To accomplish this, Livingston pulled a bait-and-switch. He promised to use arrangements by the well-known Billy May, but when Sinatra walked into the studio, the man at the podium was someone he'd never seen before. Sinatra bristled, but the session producer said not to worry. Although May was otherwise occupied, they had his arrangements, and the new guy was "just conducting."

It didn't take Sinatra long to catch on. As Kaplan describes the scene, "The band was cooking. Frank was smiling as he sang ["I've Got the World on a String"], as the seventeen musicians swung along behind him—he even had a smile for the unsmiling guy on the stand, who was waving his arms for all he was worth.

"It sure didn't sound like Billy to Frank. It didn't sound like anybody. He loved it."

Sinatra asked who the man with the baton was. Nelson Riddle, he was told. "Beautiful," said Sinatra, who was famously stingy with praise. "He looked at Riddle and said it again. 'Beautiful.'"

Livingston paired Sinatra with arranger Nelson Riddle, and produced a top-10 charting children's book-and-record capitalizing on the newfound TV fame of B-Western star Hopalong Cassidy. At a 2001 tribute show, *Bozo: 40 Years of Fun*, he shared a stage with the character he created in 1946.

When the session ended and Sinatra listened to the results, he was even more ebullient. "Jesus Christ!" he said. "I'm back! I'm back, baby, I'm back!" And indeed, thanks to the machinations of Alan Livingston, he was.

A new biography of singer Peggy Lee makes one wonder if Livingston's championship of Sinatra wasn't a form of atonement. In 1952, Lee, a Capitol mainstay, had run across an old Rodgers and Hart song, "Lover," which she wanted to revamp by speeding up the tempo and injecting a Latin vibe. Livingston nixed her request to record "Lover" because it would compete with guitarist Les Paul's recent version for the same label. Lee approached Decca Records, which agreed to take on both her and "Lover," and Livingston released her from her Capitol contract. It was a costly mistake. According to James Gavin, author of *Is That All There Is? The Strange Life of Peggy Lee*, her sexy rendition of "Lover" became "the number-three single in the country," and the 1950s became the most artistically and financially rewarding period of her career. (She eventually returned to the Capitol fold, but by then Livingston himself had gone elsewhere.) In signing and revitalizing The Voice, then, Livingston was making his own comeback as a knower of talent.

While at Capitol, Livingston was instrumental in the design of the company's eye-catching headquarters: the Capitol Tower, shaped like a stack of records and said to be the world's first circular office building. He left the firm in 1955 for NBC, where as vice president of televised network programming he supervised the Jimmy Durante, Dinah Shore, and Dean Martin shows. In 1959, Livingston fed the national passion for Westerns with the TV series *Bonanza*, which he nurtured from infancy, commissioning the script for the pilot (about a rancher and his three grown sons riding herd on the Ponderosa, a mammoth spread abutting Lake Tahoe). Ultimately stretching to 430 episodes, *Bonanza* ranked among the top 10 shows in popularity during most of its 14 seasons.

In 1955, Livingston married movie star Betty Hutton only a few days after each had obtained a divorce—Livingston from his first wife, Hutton from her second husband. How the two met is uncertain, though it may well have been through Jay Livingston, whose songs Hutton sang frequently.

At the height of her career, from 1942 to 1952, Hutton had been one of Paramount's biggest stars, a performer whose singing, dancing, and mugging could reach volcanic excess. Her best roles were Trudy Kockenlocker in Preston Sturges's bawdy farce *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* and Annie Oakley in *Annie Get Your Gun*. By 1955, she was on the Hollywood sidelines, but it would be surprising if Livingston didn't look upon the marriage as a sign of how far the kid from small-town Pennsylvania had come. As for Hutton, in her autobiography, *Backstage, You Can Have It*, she attributes her marital rebound to aesthetics: "I was unable to help myself: the man was just too good looking."

Perhaps unknown to Livingston, Hutton's exuberance was in part a coping mechanism. She'd been scarred by an impoverished and sordid childhood—a father who walked out, an alcoholic mother who shacked up with one man after another without bothering to shield her daughter from the knowledge, much uprooting, little education. Livingston encouraged Hutton to resume performing, and she did so, but her fears and perfectionism got in the way.

We have only the excitable Hutton's side of the story, but she sums up the marriage's end in fairly measured prose:

"[In] April of 1959 ... I [filed] for divorce from Alan Livingston. I charged him with causing me serious mental suffering. I knew full well I was the chief instigator in the majority of our arguments, but Alan manipulated me from the beginning in ways I found intolerable. At one very low point in our relationship, Alan carefully coerced me into terminating a pregnancy. He managed to always treat me in a manner that made me feel like a child."

Whichever of the two was more to blame, after divorcing they led markedly different lives. Hutton went to the altar twice more; each of these marriages failed, too. Elsewhere in her autobiography, she acknowledged that she "should never have married; I just wasn't

any good at it." She became addicted to pills (speed to rev her up, Valium and sleeping pills to calm her down) and burned through most of the sizable fortune she had earned from the movies. She died in 2007, at the age of 86.

Livingston fared much better in his personal life. In 1962, he married Nancy Olson, the actress who had played the girlfriend dumped by Joe Gillis when he becomes Norma Desmond's kept boy in the now-classic film *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). This marriage, which produced a son, Christopher, lasted until Alan's death in 2009, at age 91.

With the Fab Four, and their gold records for the million-selling single, "I Want to Hold Your Hand," and album, *Meet the Beatles*, in 1964. Livingston was president of Capitol Records.

In the meantime, Livingston had returned to Capitol Records, this time as president (and later chairman of the board). He made a smooth transition to the rock-and-roll era, signing the Beach Boys, The Band, and the Steve Miller Band to Capitol contracts.

The Beatles, too—although how this came about is disputed. The boys from Liverpool had been picked up by the British label EMI, but their future hinged on whether they could make it in the States. EMI and Capitol had a mutual first-refusal agreement with regard to their artists' records, but Capitol was inclined to pass on the Beatles—everyone knew that rock and roll flowed from the United States to Great Britain, not the other way around.

In a 1997 interview with the BBC, Livingston explained what came next: a surprise visit from the Beatles' manager, Brian Epstein, who begged him to listen to "I Want to Hold Your Hand." "I ... took the record home to my wife," Livingston recalled, "and said, 'You know, I think that this group, they'll change the whole music business if it happens.'"

After Livingston's death, Olson elaborated on this story for a *New York Times* obituary writer: "He called me one day and said he wanted to come home for lunch, and he *never* came home for lunch, so I knew it was important. When he got home, he said to me, very seriously, 'The music business has been big bands, then Frank Sinatra, then Elvis. This is the next step.' And he played to me this song, 'I Want to Hold Your Hand,' a very nice title. But the way they sang! 'I wanna hold your ha-a-a-a-a-a-a-and!' I said, 'Alan, that's the worst thing I've ever heard.'"

In his *The Beatles: A Biography* (2005), however, Beatles expert Bob Spitz dismisses Livingston's claim to have seen stardom in the group's future as "ridiculous, considering the paper trail of rejections from his office as well as other substantiated accounts." According to Spitz, the junior executive assigned to make the call wrote off the Beatles as "a bunch of long-haired kids."

Only when EMI practically issued an ultimatum, Spitz argues, did Livingston agree to take the Beatles on; and even then, Capitol ordered a first pressing of only 5,000 copies for the "I Want to Hold Your Hand" single. Then several things happened almost at once: the Beatles were booked for Carnegie Hall (the first rock group to be so honored); the Beatles were signed for two appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show*; and Capitol poured a whopping $40,000 into promoting "I Want to Hold Your Hand." Beatlemania swept a land still deflated by the assassination of President Kennedy, and whether by canniness or luck, Livingston had once again enriched Capitol Records.

Two years later, he was called on to referee a Beatles controversy. For the cover of their ninth album for Capitol, *Yesterday and Today*, the group was induced to mock its clean-cut image by posing in butchers' smocks amid decapitated dolls and slabs of raw meat. When Livingston saw the cover, he telephoned Brian Epstein and asked what the hell was going on. "It's their comment on war," Epstein ad-libbed. Livingston asked the Beatles to reconsider, but they refused.

Reluctant to cross his biggest moneymakers, Livingston caved. As Spitz tells it, he "ordered the cover into production and shipped out several hundred advance copies to his national sales force. 'Word came back very fast that the dealers would not touch it,' Livingston recalled. 'They would not put the album in their stores.' "He reversed himself, cancelling the cover at substantial cost. The Beatles protested, but inasmuch as their contract with Capitol was up for renewal and they were gunning for substantially better terms, in the end they caved, too. Today copies of the butcher cover are collectors' items.

Livingston's career after he left Capitol for good in 1968 was not as splashy as what came before, but then how could it have been? He started his own production company, which generated one more big hit for him: Don McLean's 1971 anthem "American Pie." Later Livingston became an executive at Twentieth-Century Fox and then president of an investment company. In 1987, he struck out on his own to make an animated cartoon based on "Sparky's Magic Piano," a song from one of his children's albums. A year later, he published a young adult novel, *Ronnie Finkelhof, Superstar*, about a teenaged nerd who becomes famous as a singer-songwriter despite refusing to appear in public.

In 1998, Alan Livingston was recognized in a way that harked back to his kid-cultivating roots: he received the International Clown Hall of Fame's Lifetime of Laughter Achievement Award. As awards go, that one may sound, well, laughable. But for a man who described himself as a mere talent-spotter, it was an overdue tribute to his creativity.◆

Dennis Drabelle is an editor at *The Washington Post Book World*. His most recent book is *The Great American Railroad War*.